
Walt Stanchfield 05

Notes from Walt Stanchfield's Disney Drawing Classes

“Angles & Tension”

by Walt Stanchfield

Angles and Tension

ANGLES AND TENSION

Angles and tension are important elements in drawing. Little has been said about them in books on drawing and in drawing classes. They can be the difference between a do-nothing drawing and an active, dynamic drawing. Tension is brought about by the appropriate use of angles in a drawing.

It is easy to imagine how a running figure can create tension by the angle of his body. Any time you pull a figure off its perpendicular norm you create tension. The figure is pulling away from one border and pushing toward the other. There is also a tension set up between the figure and the ground surface--for it would fall if something weren't done to stabilize it. There are tensions set up within the body, also, such as between the outstretched arm and the opposite outstretched leg. That tension is eased as the body prepares to change from one leg to the other. Then the tension is set up again on the opposite side.

Of upmost importance is any deviation from the perpendicular axis. We humans are very sensitive to it. We can't stand pictures hanging askew on a wall; venetian blinds that are lower on one end than the other, neckties that hang askew; if the tree we planted has started to lean, we drive a stake beside it and tie it up straight.

You've all seen and probably have a copy of Muybridges', The Human Figure In Motion. Muybridge knew the value of using vertical and horizontal lines behind all of his photographs so any deviation of angle could easily be seen. I submit that without those lines the untrained eye would miss a great many of the vital angles that was and is necessary to enact those actions and poses.

I have pointed out many times in the drawing class, there is a compulsive urge to straighten up the model's pose. The whole purpose of a gesture class is to nurture the ability to capture those subtle angles and tensions that makes the pose enjoyable, picturesque, charming, unique; or whimsical, humorous; or even sad or wretched.

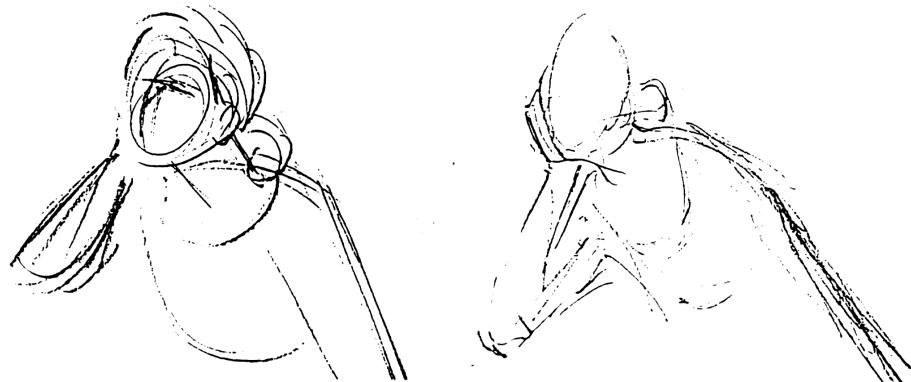
Angles and Tension

It's been tough! We've had models with costumes for the past month or so. There, dangling and sparkling before us, have been those hundreds of eye-catching doo-dads that cried out to be a featured part of the drawing. It took resistance and discipline to put them in their proper place. As Ollie Johnston often said, "It ain't easy."

Try this--whenever you make a sketch, keep a mental vertical line going through the figure somewhere. Realize that even this is an angle--it is a 90 degree right angle to the horizontal plane. Any deviation from this (in mathematical terms) would be an obtuse or an acute angle. In drawing, this deviance would set up a tension. Or to put it in less formal terms, it is what we humans use in our body language, and body language simply put is our every day form of acting and as animators, acting is our business.

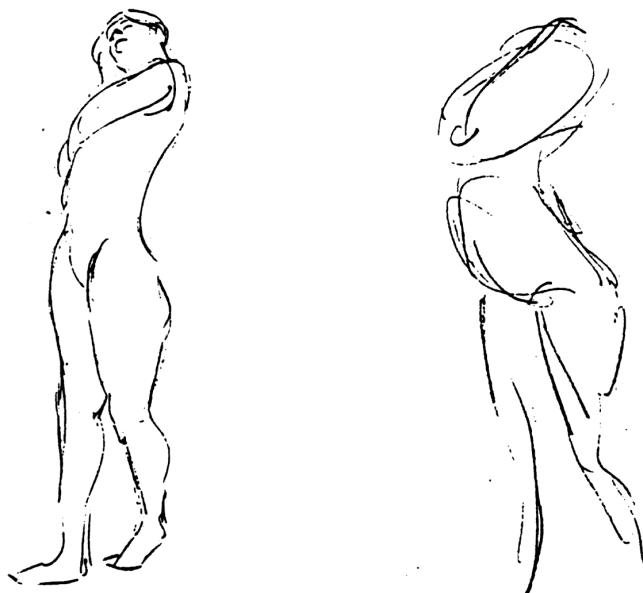
The author E.B. White wrote, "When you say something, make sue you have said it. The chances of your having said it are only fair." He could have been talking about drawing.

Here are a few corrections I made on drawings in class. All the problems were the same--a tendency to straighten up the pose and in effect iron out the gesture.



In this drawing the gesture was turning out to be of an, "Oh, my tooth hurts" nature, rather than one of reflection or deep thought. Strengthening the angles also helped to show the weight of the head on the hand, also allowing for a more definite angle of the wrist.

Angles and Tension

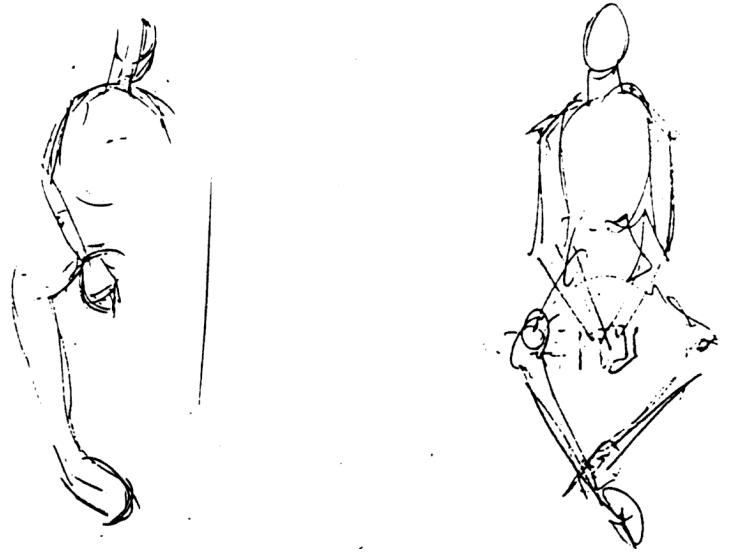


Another case of overlooking the life-giving qualities of angles. Even a still drawing should look like it has action in it, (even repose is an action) and a skillful, bold, adventurous use of angles will contribute to its presence.

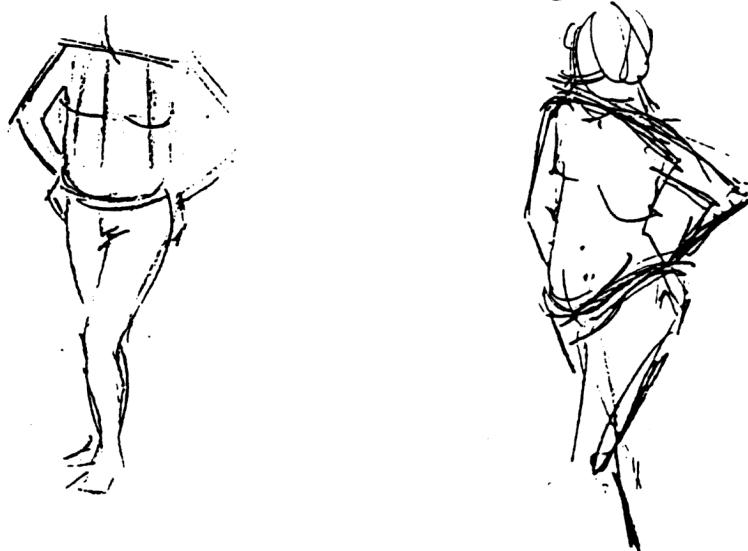


In this drawing it looks as though the artist tried to straighten the body up and even make a front view of it, interpreting the angles to suit those intentions. One doesn't have to invent angles to interpret a gesture--the body with its solid/flexible construction will dictate them for us.

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I always advocate, and urge, and even plead for the termination of the practice of drawing one elbow without the other elbow to relate it to--or one knee without the other, or a hand or a foot or shoulder, etc. Observe people at play, at work or at rest--there is a constant relationship between the joints and appendages. They are either complimenting, opposing or balancing each other. It is this relationship that creates the angles and tensions that are the tool of expressive gesture drawing.

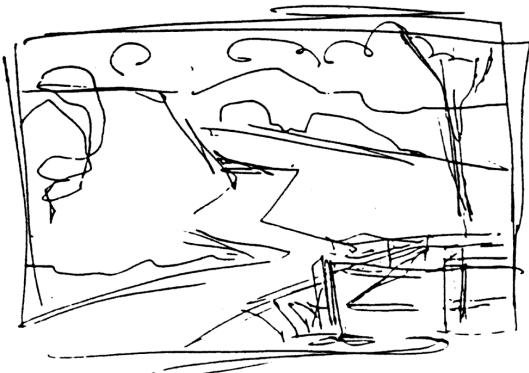
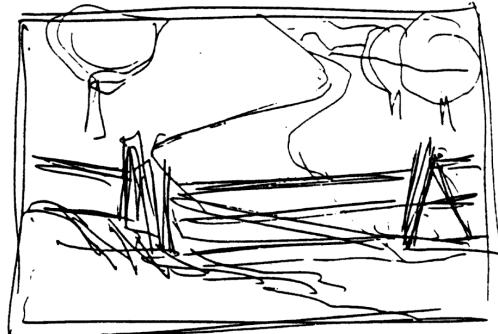


A case of straightening up the angles and losing the gesture. Even a subtle gesture should be unmistakable. A judicious sprinkling of angles will go a long way in ensuring its readability.

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APPLYING ANGLES AND TENSION IN OUR DRAWINGS

One day as my wife, Dee, and I were coming home from the tennis courts, we stopped along the country road so she could clip some reed-like plants for use in her basket making. While stopped, I, as usual, took up pen and pad and rather unthinkingly sketched what was before me--a multitude of things that were not a good set up composition-wise. I simply went through the motions of sketching. I got a lot of it down but it was a hodgepodge. Suddenly, I realized that if one of my students had done that, I would have reminded them of the rules of perspective and certainly because it was so fresh in my mind, having worked up a handout paper on angles and tension that week. So I corrected my sketch--several times, attempting to simplify and clarify things, aware that I was now drawing, not copying. The possibilities became infinite. I was no longer confused nor intimidated by the array of bits and pieces--by the parts. I began to see the scene as a whole, with all the parts fitting together into what I thought of as landscape gestures.



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The subject was a landscape but the process of sketching it was the same as if it had been a live model. I make no special claims for the drawings--they are crude and quickly drawn, their only purpose being to demonstrate a shifting from copying to creating. Betty Edwards (Drawing on the Right Side 'of the Brain'), would have said, "Shifting from the left side to the right side of the brain".

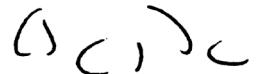
How can we apply all this to figure drawing? On the following page I have reproduced a class drawing, which for the short time in which it was done, is quite anatomically solid. But it reminds me of my first sketch of the hills--we were involved in copying, getting lots of this:



and not enough of this:



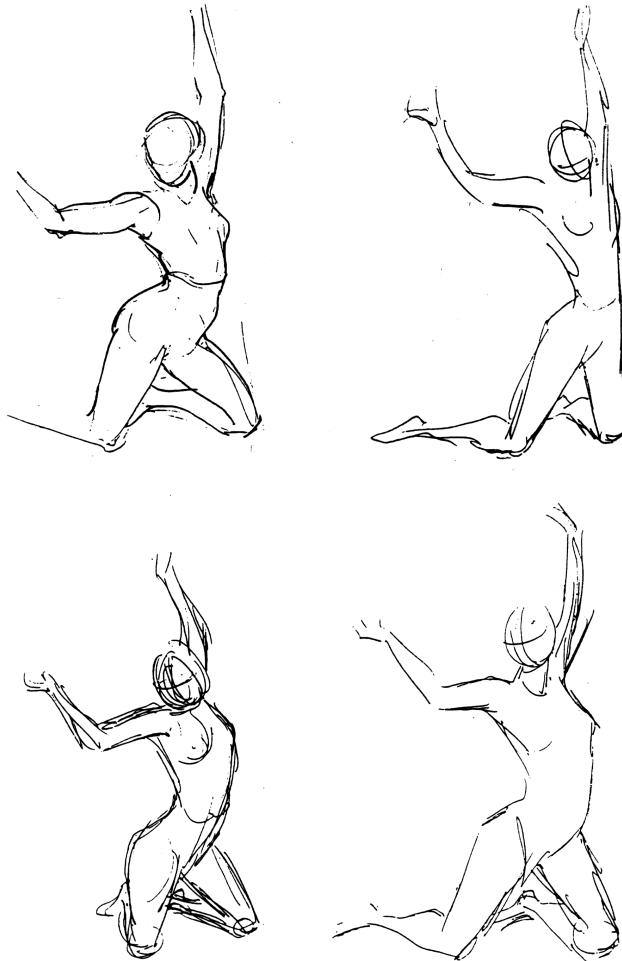
In animation squash and stretch is one of our greatest tools. Drawing a stretch with these will in no way put the idea across.



We have to learn to shift our mental gears so that when drawing a stretch, we lean less on our knowledge and infatuation of anatomy and simply draw a stretch.

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Here is the drawing along with 3 sketches I made to suggest a simple and more direct approach to the problem of capturing the pose. I changed the angles of the arms, torso and legs slightly to illustrate what I mean when I speak about using angles to clarify a pose or to bring out some desirable nuance of gesture.



In one of the sketches I straightened out one whole side of the figure to show that an almost straight line can be used for a stretch and still retain some semblance of anatomy. Notice in one of the sketches I copied the angles of the lower legs, while in the other 2 sketches, I varied them. Also notice how some sharp angled lines were used on the figure's left foot to make it read clearly as it works against the right leg. The student's drawing is a little nebulous in that area. As for tension in the drawings--imagine a large rubber band connected from hand to hand, foot to foot, knee to knee; hand to knee, head to foot etc. Tension is simply the stretching, pulling, elastic force, pressure or exertion that takes place in a pose or an action. So in effect, to capture the essence of this pose, we would not merely be drawing the left hand and the left knee--but more importantly, the tension between them.

Angles and Tension

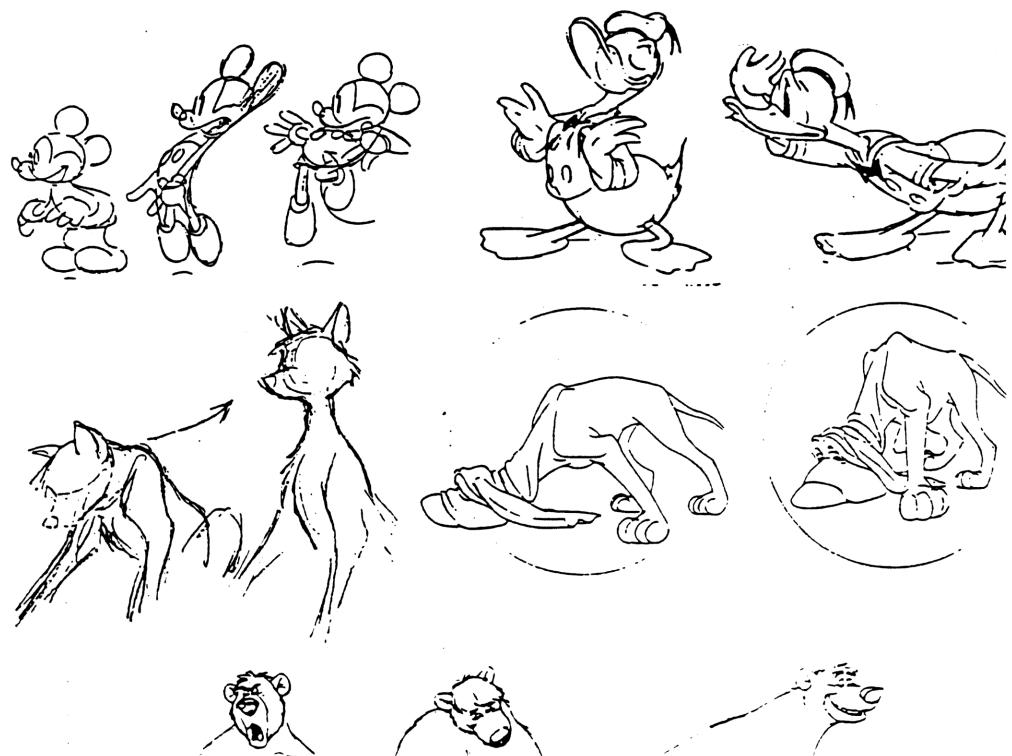
I can't resist pushing the idea of using angles in your drawings. At first it may seem that you might end up with a very abstract or stiff drawing, But that needn't be the case. perhaps there is a subtle difference in saying, "A drawing is angular" as opposed to saying "Angles have been used in the drawing"



Certainly these drawings of Medusa can be considered angular , and so they are , for she is an "Angular" character. On the other hand, these drawings of Snow White, Cinderella and Freddie Moores Girls, are quite angular but at the same time soft and feminine.



Angles and Tension



In the more cartoony characters angles are indispensable. Notice how expressive these actions are and how angles play such an important part in capturing those actions.

Walt